

Migrants are anxiously waiting. Let us not fail them.

RMMRU

THE Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a grave challenge to the policymakers. The government of Bangladesh is engaged in an uphill task to contain the contagion through enforcing lockdowns and raising public awareness, shoring up testing and treatment facilities and framing incentive packages so that damage to the national economy is minimised. A declared priority of the government is to lessen the hardship of workers engaged in various sectors.

In the past, during periods of national crisis (cyclone or floods), migrants remitted higher than the regular amounts to help households tide over the emergency. This time, however, the global scale of the crisis—triggering a sudden contraction in the flow of remittance—has exposed a big section of their left behind families to severe vulnerability. In addition, voluntary return and forced deportation of tens of thousands of workers have further compounded the crisis. Many returned empty-handed.

Reports that migrants from the Gulf states and Europe were not abiding by quarantine rules created an anti-migrant psyche. Households in which migrants returned faced resentment of the locals. They were subjected to harassment, physical assaults, extortion and discrimination in accessing medical care. Without valid evidence, returnee migrant workers were identified as the source for the spread of the infection. The class element of such labelling is evident. There was hardly any stigmatisation of other returnees (business people, students, visitors and other professionals) who failed to adhere to the quarantine rules. Marginalised migrants were the convenient villain.

In this challenging situation, RMMRU proposes several immediate and mid-term measures pertaining to the labour migration sector for consideration of the government.

Immediate Measures

Allocation of fund targeting migrant households: The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment's allocation of resources for emergency support to the migrants in destination countries and its plan to extend reintegration loan from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (WEWF) are important steps. Unfortunately, a much larger amount is needed than what can be mobilised from this

Fund. Instead of relying on the WEWF, which is generated from the migrant workers' own subscription, such fund should be sourced from the government's own exchequer. This will send a positive signal of the government's commitment to the migrants.

There is a need to extend financial support to the migrant families who are in distress and the returnees who came back empty-handed. The government should consider allocation of a large amount of resources, perhaps to the tune of thousands of crores of taka, to provide cash grants to the vulnerable migrant households so that they can stave off hunger and malnutrition. Civil society organisations can be effective partners of the civil administration at the grassroots in identifying the deserving households.

Concerns in destination countries: Taking advantage of the Covid-19 outbreak, some destination countries have taken measures to deport migrants in irregular status. Instead of adhering to international law to protect all migrants during a situation of global crisis, exerting pressure on the countries of origin to take back their nationals with the threat of blacklisting is egregious. The government should urge the concerned states to keep the matter in abeyance until the situation normalises. It is important to note that, in many instances, workers who now find themselves in irregular status migrated through the regular channel with valid visa and work permit, meeting the administrative requirements of both countries of origin and destination. On arrival in the countries of employment, they became victims of the machinations of unscrupulous rent-seeking Kafeels (sponsors) or recruiting agencies at that end.

Many migrant workers who lost their jobs due to the coronavirus crisis either returned voluntarily or were deported; they have not been able to secure their due wages and other benefits. The government should make sure that those affected can claim back such dues as soon as the situation permits.

In some destination countries, migrants cannot access free test and treatment and are thus unable to secure those services. The fear of detention precludes those in irregular status from undergoing tests. The government should urge the concerned countries not to make any distinction between citizens and migrants as it would only jeopardise the health of their own population.

In most instances, migrant workers live in cramped, unhygienic condition. The fear is, if one is infected it will spread like wildfire. The government needs to engage with the authorities of destination countries so that appropriate measures are taken to minimise the risk. Current efforts of Bangladesh missions to disseminate information about safety in Bangla should be a continuous endeavour.

The impact of Covid-19 pandemic will differ significantly on the basis of gender. The Bangladesh missions should work out modalities with the authorities of destination countries to maintain unhindered communication with the female migrants working at home to ensure they remain safe

Responsibility of the BAIRA: The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) should create an emergency fund through the contributions of its members, particularly those who are wealthy. It should immediately instruct the members to submit a list of migrants whom they have charged money to facilitate their migration. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment should demand such a list from the BAIRA.

BAIRA should also instruct its members to return money to workers in cases where the recruiting agencies have not started processing the documents. From the emergency fund, BAIRA should provide assistance to those

in the Overseas Employment Policy, 2016. Resources have to be allocated for emergency situations under the Guideline. Likewise, the Communicable Diseases (Prevention, Control and Eradication) Act, 2018 needs to incorporate the migrant issue with due importance.

Database of returnee migrants: Using the arrival data of civil aviation and immigration departments, the Ministry of Health has done an important work in identifying migrants who returned after the outbreak of Covid-19. This has created an opportunity for generation of a database of all returnee migrants through the coordination and collaboration of various ministries of the government, including home affairs, civil aviation and MEWOE.

Irregular migration and trafficking: In the aftermath of the pandemic, the scope and opportunity for migration through formal channels will substantially reduce. This will create conditions for the trafficking and human smuggling syndicates to prey on the aspirant migrants. The government should remain vigilant and take stern action against the kingpins, not merely the ground-level operatives of such nefarious trade; and in partnership with the civil society organisations, it should take measures to create awareness against irregular migration.

Responsibility of regional and international processes: In the post-pandemic phase, the member-states of Colombo Process, Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Global Forum on Migration and Development should, taking lessons from the crisis, develop appropriate short and long-term strategies for protection of migrants during emergency. As the leading state of the much-celebrated Global Compact on Migration, Bangladesh should initiate discussions in these forums at the opportune moment.

Migrants are the lifeline of Bangladesh. All along during crisis situations, they stood by the country. At this critical time, we as a nation should do our best to support the vulnerable migrants and members of the left behind families. Such support to the migrants should be no less than what has been extended to others: business, formal-sector workers and agriculture. Migrant workers are eagerly waiting for an announcement to this effect.

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Migrant workers deserve better care during this time of great crisis. STAR FILE PHOTO

and are provided with healthcare, should the need arise. Concerns of safety of the women working in other sectors should also receive equal attention.


To keep its foreign exchange reserve buoyant, the government should consider giving additional financial incentives to the remittance senders. In some areas of destination countries, remittance transfer houses are not operating and migrants are unable to send remittances. The government should urge those countries to keep such facilities open so that migrants who still have earnings can send remittances.

migrant families whose papers were processed but could not secure flights due to the sudden outbreak of the pandemic. The government should ensure that the latter group of workers is given priority in deployment without having to pay any additional sum when labour migration resumes.

Mid-term measures

Guideline for serving migrants during emergency situations: There is no established guideline about how labour migrants should be dealt with in emergency situations. This crisis has created an opportunity to frame such a guideline that can be incorporated

Mindlessness as Food for the Mind?


NAADIR JUNAID

At a time when it is essential to maintain social distancing in order to remain safe amidst the Covid-19 outbreak, we see many people displaying a reckless disregard for the need to stay indoors. Announcements explaining the necessity for physical distancing are regularly made in the media. Members of law enforcement agencies often try to reason with people who pay no heed to such announcements. But throughout the country, many people still seem reluctant to abide by the lockdown regulations, making us wonder if all the advice and requests about physical distancing have fallen on deaf ears. A few days ago, in Brahmanbaria, nearly one lakh people joined the funeral prayer of a religious leader. The police could not stop them from forming this huge gathering. If people do not understand how risky physical proximity can be at a time like this, it would be difficult to make them act sensibly merely by use of force.

Also in Brahmanbaria, defying the lockdown, rival groups recently took part in several bloody conflicts. In a video of one of the conflicts, participants of both groups are seen hurling spears and lances at each other on a swampy ground. During a clash

in Brahmanbaria, some men became so brutal that they chopped off the leg of a rival and performed a jubilant procession with the severed limb. In Feni, a man reportedly hacked his wife to death and he committed this ruthless murder live on Facebook. He did not hesitate to let people see his brutality. In Gazipur, a man died and another sustained gunshot injury when a police officer shot them. This officer was also a bodyguard of a minister. It was reported that he was suspicious about an illicit relationship between his wife and one of the men he shot.

When so many people tend to exhibit such irresponsible, reckless and violent behaviour at a time of great danger, we need to ponder about the likely causes behind this.


National Professor Abdur Razzaq once said that in order to know about the people of a country it is necessary to observe what food they eat and what books they read. For him, the bookstores of a country can reveal where the country is headed. To this, I would like to add that people's behavioural tendencies and temperaments are also shaped by the cultural goods such as movies and television dramas. Because of the proliferation of cable television and social media, television and social media content have a huge impact on the ways people think and behave. Thought-provoking, socially meaningful productions and cultural products showing glitzy and sensational elements definitely influence people differently. What type of films and television productions are

given priority in our country?

Every afternoon, several television channels show Bangladeshi mainstream movies. Common attributes of these films include: hero, heroine and villain, exaggerated acting, depiction of gory violence, garish song and dance scenes, puerile humour, tasteless dialogue, and of course, a happy ending. Almost all of these films contain a predictable plot—the hero ultimately defeats the villain no matter how menacing he seems. In doing this, such films offer an unrealistic solution to social problems because, in real life, a larger-than-life hero who can singlehandedly fight and eliminate evil forces does not exist. In these movies,

heroes solve major problems through violence. In our country, crime and violence are also glamorised in various films made outside the dominant film industry even though alternative films are supposed to dispense with the ingredients of conventional cinema.

For instance, a 2019 Bangladeshi film titled *Sincerely Yours, Dhaka*



bumps into her boyfriend in a bar, she hits him over the head with a bottle. A young man named Jibon puts a pistol against his opponent's chest and intimidates him. Carrying out the order of a local hoodlum, Jibon also shoots a man. A bank employee claims that he was framed by his boss. But instead of seeking the help of police, he says he does not have any other option but to kill his boss. Later, he kills his boss by shooting him at point-blank range. In these scenes of *Sincerely Yours, Dhaka*, violence appears as pleasurable and casual. It is unlikely that such scenes will make people loathe violence.

Gone are the days when TV dramas of our country used to make a positive impression by dint of their careful exploration of social situations, excellent acting, compelling dialogue and meaningful social messages. Unfortunately, most of today's dramas revolve around trifling problems of the romantic relationships of young couples. Overly sentimental and trivial dialogue, poor acting, and fatuous humour seem to be the defining traits of these dramas. With the vast majority of the people consuming such mindless and shallow entertainment as food for the mind for many years, can we expect them to have social awareness, good taste, and the capacity to think wisely and rationally?


To make their films more appealing, directors often glamorise violence that sends the message to the audience that violence is a means to achieving a particular objective. When many people in our country are so


frightfully imprudent as to take part in murderous fights and refuse to comply with lockdown rules at the time of a global pandemic, we need to think of the cultural and social elements that shape their mentality. It is unfortunate that there are no attempts to provide people with socially responsible, aesthetically pleasing films such as *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sangshar*, *Titash Ekti Nodder Naam*, *Akaler Sandhane*, *Shurjo Dighal Bari*, *Matir Moina*, *Rumway*, *Padma Nodder Majhi*, etc. Such films are rarely shown in our television channels these days. Most of these films are set in rural areas and deal with the lives of the common people as well as social problems. Therefore, they are relatable to most people.

Mentioning the name of eminent Russian dramatist and novelist Nikolai Gogol, Russian playwright Anton Chekhov once said, "You must not lower Gogol to the people, but raise the people to the level of Gogol." In our country, carefully planned measures are not taken to raise the level of intellectual maturity of the general public, hence the lack of good sense among many people. Cultural creations conveying mindlessness and superficiality only hamper people's mental development and do not invoke social consciousness. We must, therefore, present realistic, thought-provoking, culturally sensitive productions to make people conscious, rational and sensible.

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MARTIN LUTHER
(1483-1546)
German theologian and religious reformer.

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Dr. visit

5 Game callers

9 Bugged down

11 Begat

13 Make amends

14 Self-contained

15 Plop down

16 Heist

18 Garden activity

20 History stretch

21 "Rob Roy" writer

22 Fight memento

23 "My country -- of thee"

24 Young fox

25 "Hold on!"

27 Short skirts

29 Old auto

30 Clerical robe

32 Viscera

34 Photographer

Goldin

35 Paris sight

36 Writer Zola

38 Designer's asset

39 Historic riveter

40 Dance bit

41 Cockpit guesses

DOWN

1 Stockpile

2 Feels sorry for

3 Import opponent

4 Top rating

5 Putting to work

6 Fancy fur

7 Movie theater worker

8 Lady of Spain

10 Owed amounts

12 Exclude

17 Small worker

19 Encouraging words

22 Confession list

24 Face, in slang

25 Cuff site

26 Virgil hero

27 Demented

28 Justice Antonin

30 Move furtively


31 Petalae places

33 Poker payment


37 One of the Stooges

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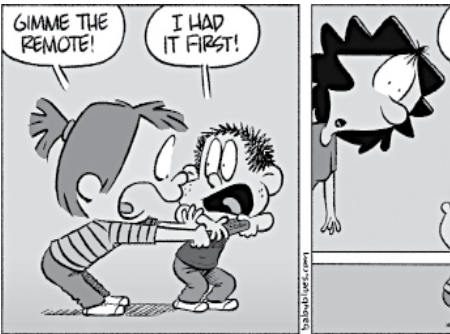
BETTE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

